Chapter 1. Introduction

This book explores the hidden world of elite schooling in Ireland. It examines how, largely out of sight, a handful of schools protect class privilege and train those who will shape Irish society. It is a sociological study of elite education. At a time when wealth inequality has reached critical levels, studies of elite education can help understand how elites maintain their hold on wealth and power and how they shape social inequality. They can also shed light on the myth of meritocracy and help us understand the pervasiveness of social violence in our societies. The Irish case is interesting in its own right. Despite the high profile of many of their past pupils, elite schools in Ireland have remained largely under the radar. Their responsibility in blocking social mobility has been largely overlooked and successive governments have treated the matter as inconsequential, allowing the narrative of a meritocratic, classless society to prevail.

Does this narrative hold up to scrutiny? Are there no elites in Ireland, and no institutions facilitating their social reproduction? Is the impact of selective private schools on Irish society as insignificant as the scant attention paid to them seems to suggest? Is the use of the term 'elite schools' even appropriate in the Irish case? This introductory chapter addresses these inevitable questions and makes the case for a sociological examination of elite schooling in Ireland. To begin, it clarifies what and who we mean by 'elites' in the Irish context. It then examines the impact of elite schooling on social inequality as documented in other parts of the world. Next it outlines the specific configuration of the private education sector and introduces some of the schools, which will be central characters in the book. The final sections explain the methodology used in this research, tackle the thorny issue of anonymity and lay out the structure of the book.

1. ELITES IN IRELAND?

The core argument of the book is that a small number of schools contribute to the reproduction of social inequality in Ireland; and that they do so by protecting and amplifying the privilege of a specific segment of Irish society. This segment is referred to as the 'elites' and at different points in the book, I argue that it behaves as a distinct and mobilized social class. This makes it necessary to clarify some of the inevitable conceptual issues around elites

and class, which are further complicated by the complex nature of class relations and class formation in Ireland.

Ireland's old and new aristocracies of wealth

The notions of inherited privilege, and more broadly those of class and elites, are at odds with the national narrative and rarely part of national conversations. Class relations are less immediately discernible than in the neighbouring UK. For instance, Ireland is believed not to have an upper class. Indeed, Ireland is a former British colony: Its upper class was a colonial elite, which was overthrown in the wake of the Irish independence (1921). The industrialization of Ireland happened at a relatively late stage and was only partial, which hindered the formation of a capitalist class rooted in industry. The opening to foreign capital in the 1950s then forced a significant reorganization of the emerging local bourgeoisie. As a result, Ireland does not have a significant upper class descending from landed aristocrats and early corporate barons. Upon closer examination, however, heirs of the colonial elite still controlled large sectors of the Irish economy well into the 1950s (Kelleher, 1987) and today several of their descendants feature on The Irish 'Rich List' – most prominently the landowning Lord of Iveagh. Perhaps more importantly, Ireland has its own indigenous dynasties of wealth: political families, industrial and retail empires (Dunnes' Stores, Barry's Teas, Brennan's Bakery, Musgrave Wholesales and most famously the Guinness dynasty), landlords owning hundreds of properties for generations, and so on: the longevity of inherited wealth is as much a reality in Ireland as it is anywhere else.

McCabe (2011) argues that rather than having a capitalist class in the conventional Marxist sense, Ireland has been dominated by a class of 'middlemen' consisting of stockbrokers, bankers, builders, lawyers or accountants, positioned between foreign capital and the resources of the Irish state, from the 1920s to the present. Finance and property, rather than land and industry, have been key to their prosperity and influence. This was particularly visible in the 1990s and 2000s (the 'Celtic Tiger' years), as 'light-touch' regulation and ad hoc tax breaks opened a space for the spectacular rise of new fortunes rooted in finance and property. Ireland, the poor man of Europe for a long time, soon became a poster child for neoliberalism, boasting one of the most globalized economies in the world as well as a striking pattern of accelerated wealth concentration.

In 2007, the magazine *Wealth: Creating, Investing, Spending* was launched in Ireland. 'Tailored to an Irish high net-worth audience', the part-lifestyle, part-wealth management magazine offered advice on purchasing fine art, vineyards, yachts, helicopters

and even ‘the ultimate status symbol: your own private island’. It included interviews with Ireland’s wealthiest individuals and promised to keep readers up-to-date with the CLEWI (Cost of Living Extremely Well Index), modelled on the cost-of-living index but based instead on ‘a basket of luxury essentials’ including Gucci shoes, a Rolls Royce and a yacht. At the time, Ireland counted six billionaires and 30,000 millionaires for a population of 4.5 million (O’Sullivan, 2007). The housing market was at its peak, propelling investors to the dizzying heights of the annual *Sunday Times Rich List*, alongside music and media celebrities, financiers, industrialists and heirs to retailing empires. In the meanwhile, aided by the profitability of the financial and property sectors, the high wages in the top ranks of the professions, civil service, media and business and by a favourable tax regime, a section of the middle class became increasingly wealthy. This reinforced, rather than challenged, the national narrative of a meritocratic society with no fixed class structure – even though social mobility remained limited throughout the period and a substantial section of the population continued to live in poverty (Causa and Johansson, 2009).

The credit crunch of 2007 and the burst of the property bubble triggered a severe economic crisis, which deepened the wealth divide. Under the successive austerity budgets, wages, social welfare benefits and public expenditure were reduced; unemployment, indebtedness, homelessness and mass emigration reached a new peak. The crisis first affected the financial, construction and property sectors and thus dislodged some of the new fortunes from the apex of the rich list. The total income of those declaring earnings over €275,000 fell by nearly 40 percent between 2007 and 2011 (FitzGerald, 2014). Yet the share of national wealth owned by the top 1 percent of the population remained stable throughout the 2000–2014 period at about 27 percent; and between 2007 and 2014, the number of Irish millionaires more than quadrupled (Shorrocks, Davi and Lluberas, 2014, p. 125, p. 111). The process of wealth concentration at the apex of the social pyramid continued unabated as the state continued to protect the beneficiaries of financial capitalism (McCabe, 2011).

We may at this stage have formed an idea of who the Irish elites might be: financiers, property investors, heirs to industrial fortunes, landowners, and so forth. What else, beyond wealth and conspicuous consumption, might bring this rather ‘mixed bag’ together? Is it closed to outsiders or relatively open? Do elites have a common culture and common interests? Are they just a collection of disconnected individuals occupying specific positions or do they constitute an ‘active social group’ (Scott, 1991, p. 2)? In other words, do they form a cohesive group able to recognize and defend their own interests? These are important questions, which have historically structured debates with the field of the sociology of elites.

Are the Irish elites a class?

There are different theories of class, elites and power, which are sometimes framed as competing with each other but their explanatory power can be amplified by blending them in, for mechanisms of domination are complex and require several concepts and theoretical viewpoints to be better understood (Shore, 2002). Class theory and power elite theory are particularly useful. Thus, we may consider that the small group we might call the 'power elite' overlaps with the broader capitalist or social upper class; for the former is largely recruited from, and acts in the interest of the latter (Scott, 1991; Useem, 1984; Sklair, 2001; Domhoff, 2006).

With respect to the broader capitalist class or social upper class, Bourdieu's concept of 'dominant classes' is useful as it does not posit ethnic or cultural homogeneity and keeps the focus on the relational nature of domination. Dominant classes or groups are not superior: They owe their position to the marginalization and subjugation of others rather than to their own intrinsic qualities. The term 'elites' is used with the same intention by many researchers working with Bourdieu's concepts. McCabe's disproportionately influent 'middlemen' or 'comprador class' could be located in this broader group, with some effectively active within the power elite. Professionals enjoy a particular status in Ireland; while they would be characterized as middle class, some achieve very high levels of remuneration and it is not uncommon for accountants, business consultants, barristers and surgeons to invest in property developments and/or secure positions in corporations or public representation. We can therefore hypothesize that access to the 'power elite' in Ireland is conditioned primarily by economic capital and social capital; facilitated by inherited wealth and positions; and that a broader group designated in Ireland as the upper-middle class is the pool from which the 'power elite' is recruited.

Further work is required to identify more precisely the Irish 'power elite' but for the time being we can accept that corporate interests are dominant and more relevant to class production and relations than, say, the opinions of the still influential Catholic clergy. We can also assume that elite networks are tighter in a country the size of Ireland. Very high levels of interlocked directorships and frequent crossovers between the public and private sectors (Clancy *et al.*, 2010) suggest that the corporate/policy elite is highly cohesive and organized. Its ability to mobilize and influence state policy has been well documented by Allen and O'Boyle (2013) and McCabe (2011) among others, with additional insights from non-academic works examining the close-knit world of banking (Ross, 2009) or construction (McDonald and Sheridan, 2008) and their influence on policy-making.

In terms of a common, exclusive culture, it is worth noting that a section of the new (or not so new) elite adopted the cultural repertoire of the former Anglo-Irish ruling class, as shown by their taste for castles, horses, nobility titles (Sir Michael Smurfit, Sir Anthony O'Reilly, Sir Bob Geldof), private members' clubs, boarding schools in Ireland or in the UK, fine art collections, philanthropy and even fox hunting – all associated with wealth and reminiscent of the social and cultural exemplars set by the colonial elite. The level of integration of this new aristocracy of wealth to older wealth is not known precisely; yet by adopting such consumption patterns and exclusive social spaces, some of the 'new rich' have in effect become a separate social group. Conspicuous or discreet havens for the wealthy dot the landscapes of Ireland's countryside and cities: The K-Club resort, where holiday homes can only be purchased by carefully selected candidates, is but one example of the many mechanisms of social, symbolic and spatial separation sought by members of this group. As far as Ryanair's multimillionaire CEO Michael O'Leary is concerned, his conspicuous 'down-to-earth' demeanour must not obscure the fact that through his relentless attacks on trade unions, workers' rights and social welfare, he is also actively defending class privileges, making visible the interests he shares with other fractions of the Irish elites.

Do the Irish elites constitute a class in and for itself, conscious of shared interests and mobilized to defend them? The question remains open. But education plays a part in class formation and by examining elite schools, the book will provide some insights into how these institutions lead children from a cross-section of upper-middle class backgrounds to view themselves as a separate, cohesive and superior social group.

2. SCHOOLING AND INEQUALITY

The role of education in social reproduction

Social scientists speak of social reproduction to describe the transfer of social positions from one generation to the next. While education systems are expected to equalize life chances by providing equality of opportunity and redressing disadvantage, in practice outcomes still differ widely in a way that correlates to parents' educational achievement and social class. Some sociologists have argued that education alone cannot minimize the impact of class position on educational outcomes: without equality of condition, equality of outcomes is impossible (Lynch, 2001, p. 398–399). Others argue that education systems not only fail to rectify inequality, but in fact reproduce and even amplify it. Bourdieu and Passeron examined how schools favoured children from privileged backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1984, 1996;

Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1979). Individuals and groups present different levels and forms of cultural capital. Cultural capital manifests itself through educational qualifications and cultural possessions; it also encompasses incorporated dispositions fostered by family socialization, such as knowledge, tastes, habits, ways of speaking and so forth. Cultural capital is a source of symbolic capital, signalling social excellence and thus legitimating dominant positions. Its relative value varies across time and space and it may compete with economic capital; but as a social relation, it remains a significant principle of legitimation, underpinning the domination of some and the marginalization of others (Serre and Wagner, 2015; Stich and Coylar, 2015). The way schools assess students' performance, motivation and behaviour is supposedly objective and class-blind. However, the cultural capital acquired in middle-class families is highly compatible with the culture and values upheld by schools. It is often interpreted as intellectual superiority and consecrated through high grades and ultimately, educational credentials. The belief that educational institutions are neutral gives even more symbolic power to their judgments and legitimizes the social violence inflicted on working-class pupils. On the surface, credentials signal merit and intelligence while in fact, their acquisition is largely conditioned by social class properties. Schooling naturalizes and amplifies social class differences through a class-based distribution of supposedly class-neutral educational judgments and titles, thus facilitating the reproduction of social inequality.

While these mechanisms operate below the surface, education systems are also unequal in more visible ways. With each higher level of educational achievement comes a higher status and chances of higher earnings in adult life. To these vertical status distinctions can be added horizontal status hierarchies. With the expansion of access to education, subtle and less subtle status hierarchies have developed generally favouring older, more expensive and selective institutions as well as certain disciplines over others (Croxford and Raffe, 2013). A degree from Harvard or Oxford is almost certainly more prestigious and beneficial to its holder than a similar degree acquired in a more obscure college. Families with higher levels of economic, social and cultural capital are better able to navigate such status hierarchies. This is exacerbated in situations where education systems have adopted market principles, allowing the wealthier to purchase educational advantage through private education, often from the earliest stages of schooling (Ball, 2003; Dronkers, Felouzi and van Zanten, 2010). Elite schools are often located in the private sector, at the higher end of the education market.

Elite schooling

A field of study dominated by seminal works by Wakeford in the UK (1969), Cookson and Persell in the US (1985) or Bourdieu in France (1996) has been revitalised and expanded with influential ethnographic monographs, in particular those by Chase (2008), Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a), Howard (2008), Karabel (2005) and Khan (2011); and numerous edited works.[1] This body of research now incorporates studies of elite schooling in countries as geographically, politically and economically diverse as Argentina, Singapore, Barbados, Bulgaria, China, Nigeria, South Africa, Sweden and many more.[2] Even in countries believed to have relatively egalitarian education systems, researchers are now charting new maps of educational inequality focussed on emerging (or established but long ignored) elite institutions (Börjesson *et al.*, 2016 on Sweden; Deppe and Krüger, 2016 on Germany), suggesting this is indeed a world-wide phenomenon.

While elite schools share common features across borders, there is no fixed, universal model of elite education (Kenway and Koh, 2015) and comparative studies have uncovered significant variations. As already mentioned, the relative value of different forms of capital may vary from one field to another, from one national context to another, and over time. Elite schools need to provide the form of capital most relevant to the field they operate in. For instance, they may successfully adapt to a changing structure of power, becoming more modern, academic or international – whichever is required or desirable – and thus maintain their legitimacy (Cookson and Persell, 2010) or instead lose ground to new contenders on the market and vanish into (relative) insignificance (Rivzi, 2014). Earlier works suggested that guaranteeing social and cultural homogeneity was central to the mission of elite schools; Bourdieu in particular spoke of 'social paradises' to describe these socially harmonious environments. Contemporary literature on elite schools in Anglo-Saxon countries – on which we will focus for the time being due to the influence of the British model of elite education across these countries, of which Ireland is one – suggests elite schools have broadened their recruitment as meritocracy gradually replaced inherited privilege as a principle of legitimation (Cookson and Persell, 2010; Khan, 2011; Weis and Cipollone, 2013). However, while they may operate scholarships, they tend to remain expensive institutions, located in privileged areas affordable only to a minority. Their fees have increased much faster than inflation over time, meaning that the economic barrier to entry has been risen rather than lowered. In addition, scholarships legitimate rather than challenge the exclusionary practices at the heart of elite schooling. When they are recruited, atypical students are marginalized or expected to conform: elite identities remain strongly raced, classed and gendered in elite

schools (Chase, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández and DiAquoi, 2010), which perhaps reflects the enduring centrality of white, upper-class (and golf-playing) masculinity in apparently 'diverse' elite circles (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 2006). Importantly, due to the intricacies of social class and academic performance, 'meritocracy' still rewards the privileged (Kenway and Koh, 2015).

Elite schools have also adapted to the changing and unchanging demands of the elite job market. Elite education offers tangible benefits such as privileged learning conditions (better facilities, smaller classes and higher expectations) but is also key to the constitution of social networks and admission to the most coveted higher education institutions (Dunne, King and Ahrens, 2013; Khan, 2010; Zimdar, 2010). In turn, these elite colleges bestow prestigious credentials, normalize a sense of superiority and 'funnel' their graduates towards elite professions (Binder, Davis and Bloom, 2015). Academic credentials are now more important than ever and elite schools have raised their game accordingly. But they provide more: In times where high-earning positions are becoming scarce, there is a fear among the middle classes that credentials may not be enough (Brown *et al.*, 2013; Tomlinson, 2008). Work experience (in particular internships in prestigious organizations), volunteering and international travel are now integral components of the elite educational experience, in addition to the traditional team sports and extra-curricular activities. Thus despite signs of opening and change, elite schools continue to play an active role in the social reproduction of the most privileged. In fact, the 'private school premium' (in terms of earnings in later life) has increased in recent decades in the UK: the impact of elite schools on social inequality is now more significant than it was in the 1980s (Green *et al.*, 2012).

Statistical analyses, such as the one just mentioned, are extremely valuable as they objectivize the most salient aspects of privilege. But the necessary data is not always accessible (it is not in Ireland); and even when it is, figures may only tell part of the story. To complement existing quantitative studies, several scholars have examined the 'character' of elite schools, the culture they promote and how their students internalize elite status. Excellence is multifaceted and elite schools often boast that they provide a 'total education', shaping students intellectually, socially, morally, physically and spiritually. They instil a sense of social and intellectual superiority in their students, building their self-confidence, sense of entitlement and 'assured optimism' (Bourdieu, 1996; Howard, 2008; Maxwell and Aggleton, 2013; Forbes and Lingard, 2015). When disconnected from social class and type of school attended, the cultivation of self-confidence and expectations may not affect career outcomes significantly (Green *et al.*, 2015); but they contribute to the sense elite students

have that they deserve their positions and that social hierarchies are fair (Khan, 2011, p. 196). For all these reasons, the impact of elite schools on society is considerable. The culture of elite schools, as well as the dynamics at play within the field of elite schooling, can shed light on the mechanisms of domination that shape social inequality in a given national context – for these are neither fixed nor universal. This is particularly relevant in the case of Ireland, where social science has not given elites the attention they deserve.

3. EXAMINING ELITE EDUCATION IN IRELAND

The Irish education 'market'

The Irish second-level school system largely owes its existence to private initiatives led by religious orders and congregations, often motivated by local demand rather than following requests from the state. Unlike countries where education systems have recently embarked on processes of privatization (and unlike the situation at third level in Ireland), the Irish post-primary system was originally essentially private, with the state getting involved at a later stage. Today these state-subsidised, privately owned and privately run schools (called Secondary Schools and distinct from state-run Community or Comprehensive Schools) cater for slightly over half of the school-going population. Another distinguishing feature of the Irish education system is that the vast majority of primary and post-primary schools, private or not, are denominational: mostly Catholic, sometimes Protestant, occasionally Jewish or affiliated to the 'School of Philosophy', with a handful of multi-denominational institutions. In addition, one third of post-primary schools are single sex, a higher proportion than is the norm internationally.

Access to secondary education became free in 1967, relatively late by European standards. With the 'Free Education Scheme', the state offered to pay students' fees directly to schools. A handful of schools chose to remain outside the scheme and to continue charging fees. Therefore, while all Secondary Schools are technically private, only a minority charge fees, which is why the term 'fee-paying schools' is used here to avoid confusion with the wider private sector, most of which is accessible at no cost. Unlike the situation in the UK for instance, fee-paying schools are not independent institutions: they receive significant subsidies from the state in the form of teachers' salaries and various grants. Yet and also unlike the British situation, they are not required to demonstrate that they provide 'public benefit' (Davies *et al.*, 2010) and are not expected to operate scholarships – although in practice, some do. They are held by rules applying to the rest of the sector in terms of

inspections, curriculum and admission policies, which, as we will see, leave these schools considerable latitude. As opposed to the French situation, where the structure of funding is not dissimilar but where private institutions charge relatively modest fees, several Irish fee-paying schools charge fees unaffordable to the vast majority of the population.

The legitimacy of the private and the private for-profit sectors and the 'right to choose' are strong features of the Irish education system. Today, between the schools, which opted out of the Scheme in 1967, those who came into existence at a later stage and minus the small number, which joined the Free Education Scheme in recent years, there are 53 fee-paying secondary schools out of a total of over 732 post-primary schools.[3] Together these schools cater for 6.7 percent of the school-going population. There is also a growing independent (non-state-subsidised) for-profit sector, characterised by institutions offering additional tuition ('grind schools') as well as full-time education, thus competing directly with the state-funded sector and extending the landscape of the education market. Independent institutions exist at primary and higher levels as well. At primary level, there are over 40 independent schools; often acting as feeder schools for the post-primary fee-paying sector. These receive no state subsidies and with annual fees in the €5,000–10,000 range, represent a significant financial investment.

Parents' right to choose public, private, independent or home education for their children is enshrined in the Irish Constitution and the state is not supposed to interfere with parents' decisions in this respect. Unlike other jurisdictions, Ireland does not have a centralized system by which school places are allocated on the basis of catchment areas. For their part, schools are allowed to establish lists of priority criteria and to select their pupils accordingly. Schools may for instance give priority to a given religious denomination, siblings of already enrolled pupils, children of past pupils and/or children from their feeder schools. Some schools, in particular in the fee-paying sector, are more in demand than others and may therefore allocate a substantial proportion of places to children of past pupils, to the detriment of others. This is legal and legitimate as long as the admission criteria are openly available and not blatantly discriminatory, namely not based on ethnicity or academic ability. Thus, in Ireland, schools are advised not to select pupils on academic grounds, which jars with trends observable in other jurisdictions, where 'meritocratic' selection is considered fairer than selection based on kinship ties. There are now talks to limit the number of places reserved for past pupils' children and challenge the right of schools to select pupils on the basis of religion but at the time of writing, given the mobilization of the Catholic Church, of fee-paying schools and their past pupils, it seems reasonable not to expect any meaningful

change to the current legislation. As elsewhere, the 'right to choose' leads to significant social and ethnic segregation (Kitching, 2013; Lynch and Moran, 2006; Smyth *et al.*, 2009). Progression rates to third level vary widely from one school to another as shown in annual league tables (for instance *Irish Times* 27 November 2014; see also McCoy *et al.*, 2014). In the Irish case, while parents can choose, so can schools and where their logics converge the impact on social segregation is amplified.

The elusiveness of Irish elite schools

Unlike the situation in the US, UK or France, the Irish higher education landscape is stratified but not to the extent that a separate elite category (such as the Ivy league, Russell group or Grandes Écoles) emerged. The educational background of the most visible elites, such as political elites or famous businesspeople, varies significantly with no apparent connection between educational credentials and power, at least on the surface. Several studies examined the Irish private education market and stated that it furthered the advantage of middle-class students (Hannan and Boyle, 1987; Lynch, 1989; Lynch and Moran, 2006) – or did not (Booroah, Dineen and Lynch, 2010). These schools are generally not viewed as playing a significant role in the reproduction of power and privilege, beyond the protection of middle-class advantage – although historian Ciaran O'Neill eloquently challenged this view in a national paper (2014b) and some scholars have begun to examine them in this light (e.g. Kennedy, 2009, 2014).

Charging fees over 15,000 euros a year, occupying castles and boasting alumni famous in politics, business or literature, a number of schools were prime suspects in my investigation of elite educational spaces. The ban on academic selection and the scarcity of bursaries and scholarships suggested these schools were out of reach even for 'talented' or 'deserving' children from the lower classes, and for that matter, large sections of the middle classes. The preferential treatment afforded children of past pupils evoked a closed system of straight social reproduction. The phrase 'understated powerhouses' used by Forbes and Weiner (2008) to describe elite schools in Scotland came to mind. However my endeavour was initially met with much scepticism, including in academic circles. The diversity within the fee-paying sector, the relative affordability of some of these schools and the existence of high-performing schools outside the sector were among the objections raised (by contrast, several past pupils agreed that their schools were indeed extremely privileged and exclusive). Historically Irish schools grew in the shadow of their more prestigious British neighbours, which were a favourite destination for the children of the Irish elites over the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries (O'Neill, 2014a). Arguably Public Schools such as Eton and Harrow epitomize what we understand to be elite schools: Their deep connections with the British establishment have been well documented and beyond scholarly circles, they exert a certain fascination on the British psyche. Their long history, prestigious associations, physical character, their perceived aristocratic culture, their rituals and the air of scandal that has at times surrounded them all contribute to make them objects of fascination. By comparison, the main characteristic of the Irish Clongowes or Saint Columba's in the Victorian era was 'anonymity' (Flanagan, 1977, p. 31). A recurring objection was that given the generous subsidies given by the state, fee-paying schools were affordable to teachers or police officers – again, unlike an Eton in the UK. Another was that the connection between these schools and power were tenuous, with few visible figures of the political and economic world known to have attended them. Arguably a school would not be an elite school if it did not at some point produce elites; thus the latter objection deserves consideration and will be addressed in detail in Chapter 3. For the time being, it is worth stressing that the clientele of elite schools is rarely exclusively upper class; in addition not all their pupils achieve elite positions. Answering the former objection is somehow easier: As is the case in other countries, private or fee-paying does not necessarily mean elite. Fee-paying schools have to do with privilege, but different schools can be associated with different levels of privilege, including different levels and forms of capital. Day fees vary from less than €3,000 to over €13,000 and boarding fees from less than €7,000 to a staggering €25,000. Size, history, demographics, physical characteristics and academic results also differ greatly from one school to another. It is necessary therefore to distinguish schools, which cater for elites and play a significant role in their social reproduction from the rest of the fee-paying sector. This is done in Chapter 3, where four groups of schools are identified according to their level of exclusivity, prestige and relevance to the production and reproduction of elites. Ten schools are thus identified as elite schools ('Top Elite' and 'Elite') and are the main focus of the book. Another 20 schools are identified as 'Sub-Elite' schools. These are of importance as firstly, some within this group aspire to the same standards as elite schools and share similar pedagogic and organisational features. Secondly, this status hierarchy is fluid and by no means definite: Even in recent years, a subtle re-ordering has taken place and as suggested by other researchers, the field of elite education is a shifting ground. In addition, even within the select group at the top of the fee-paying sector, each school is unique; dismissing their respective specificities as details would obscure precisely what makes them elite schools, each one in its own way. Capturing these characteristics and logics requires a close-up examination. As a

result, throughout the book, the focus zooms in and out, from fee-paying schools as a group, to elite schools as a sub-group, and again to case studies of single schools in isolation.

Central questions

As we shall see, past pupils of Irish elite schools are well represented in corporate circles. Yet is this enough to hold these schools responsible for the social violence exerted by elites? Not much is known generally about political socialisation in elite schools at secondary level; not all past pupils become decision-makers – and not all subscribe to the neoliberal ideology. Education is not the only pathway to the elites and for that matter, being a member of the corporate elite is not the only way to become wealthy. But elite schools play a role at a different level. As I will argue in this book, their main contributions are firstly, the facilitation of an exclusive access to dominant positions for individuals recruited among the upper-middle class (whose class interests lie in the preservation of financial capitalism); secondly, the reinforcement of a class identity (which comes with a normalization of social segregation; and dispositions compatible with the exercise of power through the mobilization of social capital); and thirdly, the legitimation of domination through an apparent 'taming' of capitalism and an emphasis on moral capital (aligned with the notion that elites deserve their dominant positions and know what is good for society). In doing this, I draw from several theoretical traditions, in particular Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction and distinction (without overseeing local specificities) and Anglo-Saxon elite theory, which is framed within the larger field of class reproduction theory. Complementary insights are drawn from the emerging body of literature on elite schooling in other countries.

In the words of Cookson and Persell, the central question in studies of elite schools should not be 'if' they contribute to inequality but 'how' they do it (Cookson and Persell, 1985a, p. 18). In this spirit, the bulk of the book focuses on what elite schools actually do: What happens behind their gates and how it impacts on their students' socialization, self-perception, social practices, sense of boundaries, and ultimately on society at large. A number of questions are asked: What makes elite schools distinct from other schools? How do they recruit their students: if academic criteria are not used, what principles guide the selection? Do they instil a sense of solidarity, which may translate in class cohesion? What culture do they teach? What is the relative value of various forms of capital in an elite education? How can this help us understand the principles of domination at play in Irish society? What culture and representations do past pupils bring with them when they take up positions of power? What are the implications for those they will manage, judge or rule?

While similar questions have long preoccupied scholars of elite education, the Irish context raises additional questions. Firstly, the history of elite formation is far from linear and therefore does not follow patterns observable in other societies. Secondly, these schools are not financially independent from the state, which poses the question of how they maintain their legitimacy in a more acute manner. Thirdly, commenting on the discernible patterns in contemporary elite education, van Zanten notes four major changes, among which the increased importance of academic merit and individual achievements, while 'family history and resources [are] being pushed into the background' (2015, p. 9). This may not be the case in Ireland, where mechanisms of closure remain strong with few admission channels for outsiders (no matter how academically talented): in this unusual case, again, what principles of legitimation are at play? Fourthly, while Kenway and Koh (2015) argue that globalisation has prompted a 'reorganization of privilege', the impact of globalization on Irish elite schools is more nuanced. National(ist) cultural capital is surprisingly potent in this country characterized by a highly globalized economy and where one might expect international capital (Wagner, 1998) to be more highly valued. In sum, the book examines where Irish schools lie in the global landscape of elite education; it seeks to shed light not only on the formation of a minority of pupils but also, more broadly, on the morphology of educational and social inequality in Ireland.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study of elite education in Ireland employs a qualitative methodology, based principally on open-ended interviews with school staff and former students, supplemented with documentary research and participant observation. It is distinct from classic ethnographic studies, in the sense that it attempts to capture the spirit of a sector of the education system, in its diversity and with its blurred contours, rather than focus on one individual school. Instead of depicting the character of a school 'in the moment', it includes the voices of past pupils who have been educated in elite schools at different points in time. Past pupils attended their respective schools in the 1950s for the oldest participants and in the 2000s for the youngest. Most were in school in the 1980s and 1990s and were in their late twenties to early forties at the time of the interviews. Without assuming a continuity in school practices over time, including past pupils makes more visible the long-lasting effects of an elite education or, in Proctor's words, 'the somewhat intangible influences of attending a particular school through the eyes of some of the people who had been the subjects of that influence' (Proctor, 2011, p. 844).

While Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) and Khan (2011) were both past pupils of the schools they undertook to study, I was not a past pupil of an Irish fee-paying school. I did attend a version of an elite school in France, but it was at third level and it was neither private nor fee-paying. The world of Irish elite schooling was unknown to me. The initial phase of my research consisted in amassing literature on each of the then 58 fee-paying schools as well as independent schools and possible contenders in the free sector. Promotional material, newsletters, alumni publications, anniversary publications were collected from schools and libraries. The amount provided varied from one school to the other, some schools sending appealing glossy brochures and DVDs, and others – in particular the most established ones, which presumably do not need to actively seek new recruits – short and simple leaflets with no illustrations. Elite schools are narcissistic; most fee-paying schools have published or commissioned books celebrating their history, for their past pupils to purchase and cherish. Once assembled these pieces constituted a complex puzzle. While privilege was common to all, vast differences emerged in terms of ethos, clientele, and so forth. Inaccuracies in official figures complicated the task of mapping the sector and compiling fee structures proved a surprisingly arduous task, hinting at the level of secrecy maintained around these schools. Some of these publications provided personal accounts from students, which – however circumstanced by the promotional or celebratory character of the publications – drew my attention to the potential impact of these schools on students' socialization and self-perception. While the French educational system remains extremely unequal, with the *Grandes Écoles* acting as distinct pathways to elite positions, their selection is largely based on educational criteria, at least on the surface. The most prestigious schools are not the most expensive ones. In Ireland, however, the overrepresentation of fee-paying schools in the top sections of league tables seemed to indicate a very different situation. Besides, elite schooling in France is characterized by an ethos of hard work, asceticism and competition (Bourdieu 1996), which the material I had collected on Irish fee-paying schools at this stage did not seem to reflect.

Access to elites and elite settings may be difficult for various reasons: Unlike the underprivileged, the powerful often have a voice of their own, and may not see the sociological investigation as an opportunity to make their concerns known to a wider audience and draw attention to their situation. It is not in their interest to disclose inequality or injustice and they may be wary of sociology, a discipline often labeled as left-wing. The study of elites may betray a willingness to correct an imbalance in the distribution of knowledge (as it is more often the case that research provides elites with strategic knowledge

about the masses than the other way round) and can therefore be perceived as 'a political act' in itself (Hunter, 1995, p. 151). Elites may have important positions or agendas to protect from the sociological and public gaze – which is precisely why Bourdieu encouraged social scientists to keep questioning what is hidden (1993). On a more practical level, elites (or those who work for them) are often busy people, and may not wish to give their time to the researcher. However access was easier than predicted by colleagues. I began contacting school principals by letter to request interviews, and about a third agreed to meet me in person. My letters focused on my interest in the particular history and culture of the school, thus displaying the interest, goodwill and reverence recommended by Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot in elite research (2005). As I soon found out, this helped me in gaining access:

> We get lots of requests and some of them I turn down, I mean - sometimes the way people write their letters of request is instructive, and you clearly had a bit of knowledge about [School] already so I think if someone is interested in [School] and is prepared to back that up with research, I'm more than happy to help (Principal, interview).

My research was conducted at a time when cuts to the education budget were being discussed and the state-funding of fee-paying schools came under the spotlight. One school Principal, whom I met informally at a school reunion, categorically refused to be interviewed, arguing that he systematically turned down researchers and journalists, on principle. On the other hand, other Principals were eager to put across their own points of view in relation to the funding issue, and possibly saw in the interview an opportunity to defend their cause. While some of my letters mentioned the funding issue, the focus of my research was not on the debates, which preoccupied the media. My interest in schools' pedagogy, identity, history and ethos, which I highlighted in these letters, dissociated my approach from a journalistic one. This was also helpful, as this interview excerpt illustrates:

> I don't talk to the media, I don't do interviews … I've realized at this stage that it serves no purpose, em for [School] or me to talk to the media about anything, there's been a number of high profile issues and incidents and my practice is I don't talk to the media. Do I feel we get a rough deal? I don't assess that – the media are there to sell newspapers, they see [School] as a label, which is the prominence in Irish society and they believe that they will sell newspapers if they reference it. That's their primary interest, their primary interest is not education in Ireland, it's not the development of education in Ireland, it's selling newspapers. So that is their business, our business is education (Principal, interview).

Lamont (1992) suggested that her Canadian nationality made it difficult for her American and French interviewees to place her socially or to attribute a particular agenda to her, which she argued helped her gain access and encouraged her participants to speak freely about sensitive

issues. My nationality might have played a role as some of my interviewees were surprised by my familiarity with the Irish education system; one did not expect me to have a good command of English at all. Another factor, which I became aware of at a later stage, may explain why I got access to some schools. As one staff member explained, a particular fee-paying school in Dublin is often used to showcase the Irish education system whenever foreign officials visit the country. This school therefore has played a representative role in the past; while it remains closed to Irish journalists, opening its doors to foreign visitors has become habitual practice. Introduction by a gate-keeper is helpful if not essential to gain access to exclusive groups (Hill, 1995). While most interviewees were contacted directly without prior introduction or referral, it is thanks to a gate-keeper that I was admitted to past pupils' events and invited to stay in one particular school over a number of days.

Some respondents warned me from the beginning of the interview that they did not have much time. One in particular greeted me with a solemn 'right, you have thirty minutes' and spent most of these 30 minutes reciting the institutional discourse without leaving me any time to ask questions: an example of the art to talk while saying nothing that elites master (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot, 2005). Two respondents turned the tables and in effect interviewed me: they were both eager to find out what my position was on the funding of fee-paying schools. This situation of role reversal is common in elite research and illustrates the dominated position researchers may find themselves in when examining the powerful (Arthur, 1987). As we will see in Chapter 4, elite schools are physically impressive and exert a certain amount of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1984) on the unsuspecting visitor. Elites sometimes dominate the researcher not only because they have more economic capital but also because they have more cultural capital. Most of my interviewees were highly educated people, many with a perfect command of the French language. Some used Latin phrases and biblical references. Hammersley (1984) and Peshkin (2001) wrote about their feelings of inadequacy as they conducted their research in elite boarding schools and I experienced similar feelings on occasions. Yet, throughout my research, I found the vast majority of staff members extremely courteous and helpful and I experienced none of the open hostility described for instance by Walford (2001, p. 71–74).

In fieldwork, the researcher adopts a variety of roles, which change as a result of a process of constant re-negotiation with the subjects of the research. Initially, the researcher has no option but to conform to the roles, which are recognized and accepted by the subjects (Walford, 2001, p. 63–64). Some of the staff members seemed to assume I was a scholar of education, rather than a sociologist (one commented that I would 'probably end up running a

school one day'); gate-keepers would introduce me to colleagues as 'a researcher from the Sorbonne'. Several were eager to hear my views on the Irish education system, on the benefits of boarding, and in one case, on a pilot scholarship scheme. Thus, in the same way as Walford, I was 'cast in the role of 'sympathetic researcher' (2001, p. 79). At times, interviews and other encounters in the setting became in effect informal conversations on the merits of boarding or on the French education system and, as noted by Gaztambide-Fernández:

> Despite my discomfort in such an affluent school, being able to 'talk shop' about boarding schools while engaging in academic discussions about education seems to legitimate my presence (2009a, p. 3).

In order to compare and contrast perspectives, it was necessary to talk to former pupils and pupils' parents. As informants, past pupils have valuable insider knowledge of the secretive world of elite schooling, its norms and boundaries, and often views different from the institutional discourse presented by school principals in their representative roles. Fee-paying schools cater for less than 7 percent of the school-going population but inevitably, the proportion of past pupils of fee-paying schools students is higher in university circles. It was also surprisingly high in the activist circles I frequented; participants were therefore easy to recruit. As my approach was qualitative, I did not follow strict sampling procedures but took care to interview a reasonable cross-section across age groups, gender and schools.[4] I interviewed past pupils who hated their school experience and had become fierce opponents to private education, as well as others who were still grateful and loyal to their alma maters and would send their children there 'at the drop of a hat'. I interviewed people who achieved prominent positions in Irish politics, business or media; and others who did not. I conducted 34 recorded interviews; to which must be added numerous informal conversations, for the most part unplanned, which took place in a variety of settings. In-depth interviewing helps the respondent to uncover his or her own suppressed or conflicting attitudes about the topic discussed (Johnson, 2002). By delving into their own feelings about their personal experience, several respondents came to reflect on their own attitudes to privilege and social justice. As far as school Principals and staff were concerned, the longest the interview lasted, the more respondents tended to depart from the institutional discourse and in some cases shared very critical views on their schools, in particular the tension between the values of tolerance and openness promoted by the institutions and the social segregation, which is part and parcel of an elite education.

I used my visits to schools as opportunities to observe the setting and interactions. Before and after each interview, I spent some time on the school grounds. I spent four days

and three nights in one particular school, where the staff insisted I stayed because they did not want me to have a wrong impression by getting only a glimpse, or 'a slice of life' in the school. In another school, I was invited to observe a class and to speak with the pupils. In addition, I attended a number of past pupils' reunions and school matches. Although the time I spent on the field was limited in comparison to the time spent by Chase (2008), Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) or Khan (2011), my approach was firmly grounded in ethnography as I observed 'the full range of social behaviour' (Pole and Morrison, 2003, p. 3) within the schools I visited.

Weber guarded social scientists against the risk of imposing their own views on the collected data and stated that the best way to avoid biases was to adopt the point of view of the people under study. However, Brewer argues that the purpose of analysis is to 'capture social meanings rather than necessarily "telling it as it is"' (2000, p. 107). Respondents may evade questions or hide behind 'fronts' (Douglas, 1976). Some past pupils distanced themselves from the world of privilege they had been brought up in. One respondent (now a political activist) said he was 'indifferent' to the high-profile guest speakers and luxurious trips abroad that his school organized and described himself as being very sarcastic and critical of his school at the time he was there. As Walford writes, 'identity is created rather than revealed through narrative' (2001, p. 92); thus sociological analysis must strike a balance between reflecting respondents' points of views and identifying patterns discernible beyond the surface. Self-reflexivity is an important element in the research process (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Inevitably, the researcher carries his or her own history and habitus onto the field. Elites can exert fascination; they can also cause envy. The spectacle of privileged childhoods may for instance hold a mirror to the researcher, reflecting a less than perfect childhood. I myself grappled with these feelings as I conducted my fieldwork; keeping a reflexive fieldwork diary was helpful in achieving a balanced, if not neutral analysis of collected data.

5. NAMING NAMES

The names of all participants have been changed. School Principals, Vice-Principals, Wardens, Headmasters, housemasters, rectors, counselors and teachers, retired or not, are designated by broader terms such as 'staff' or 'administrator' – although some sociologically relevant information is lost through this de-identification process.[5] Schools, however, are not systematically de-identified. Many researchers of elite education choose not to name the schools they describe and use pseudonyms instead; generally social scientists anonymize not

only the individuals but also the institutions they study, for ethical and increasingly for legal and political reasons (Aldred, 2008; Laurens and Neyrat, 2010). Sometimes they do so in the full knowledge that de-identifying these institutions is futile, for they are easily recognizable[6]. Oxford or Harvard are generally fully identified for this reason and also because social scientists see it as their mission to uncover what is hidden, especially where it concerns power structures. Irish schools derive symbolic power from their historically inherited and consciously cultivated uniqueness. The location of schools, their physical character, religious affiliation and other identifying features such as boarding/day or single-sex/mixed status impact greatly on the type of socialization they provide and are therefore significant sociologically. But de-identifying Clongowes as a 'Jesuit all-boys boarding school' would not be de-identifying it all, for there is only one school fitting this description. I could have given these schools fictitious names or moved them to imaginary towns, as I did in some of my published work (Courtois, 2015a, 2015b) but these specific articles were less concerned with the positions occupied relationally by these schools in the field of elite education than some sections of this book are; in addition, this partial anonymization (to be completely impenetrable it should have disguised the institutions beyond recognition, literally, and erased all their specific and sociologically meaningful characteristics) may be 'almost absurdly transparent'[7] to readers familiar with the Irish school system.

I deliberately name the schools whenever it is relevant to the analysis or where, as in Chapters 2 and 3, my data is mainly based on sources available to the public. I smudged some details when I quoted a past pupil in a section where his/her school was identified to ensure individuals could not be identified. I removed the schools' names when they were not indispensable and used the coding system explained in Chapter 3 ('Top-Elite school', 'Elite school', 'Sub-Elite school'). On occasions, for instance when several schools were compared in a same section, pseudonyms were used for ease of reading: Glenveigh, Saint Enda's, Castlewoods, Ardara are thus fictitious names. The town name 'Mulcreen' is also fictitious. Is this anonymizing strategy infallible? I do not think so. Will it harm the reputation of the schools? I doubt it. In her study of middle-class parents' strategies for the schooling of their children, van Zanten (2012) notes that parents hide or disguise what are essentially strategies of social segregation. By contrast, Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot argue that elites easily acknowledge that they seek their own company and organize to preserve their class privilege, which they feel naturally entitled to (2005). Several interviewees argued that it is natural for parents to offer their children 'the best education money can buy'. As for schools, providing such an education is their mission and raison d'être; in a way, the book shows that they do the

job well. The book does not argue for the removal of state subsidies: while it is unfair to subsidize privileged institutions, the issue lies deeper and unless social conditions are equalized, unless social diversity is valued by all rather than feared, the wealthy will continue to find strategies to further their competitive advantage. My hope is that instead of being used to fuel any future debate on the funding of elite schools, this book contributes to a reflection on 'meritocracy', privilege, inequality and the legitimacy of our elites of wealth and power.

6. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In order to better understand the present situation, Chapter 2 explores the origins and historical development of elite schooling in Ireland, in relation to power shifts between elite groups and their respective cultural norms; it introduces some of our central characters: Clongowes Woods College, Blackrock College, Saint Columba's College and Glenstal Abbey School in particular. This chapter begins the process of identifying what gives these schools their symbolic power. Turning to the present, Chapter 3 examines the characteristics and funding structure of the fee-paying sector as a whole; it then moves on to establish a temporary, fluid hierarchy of schools, based principally on an analysis of the Irish *Who's Who*. Based on three case studies, Chapter 4 depicts elite schools as separate worlds, and examines how the environments they create impact on students' self-perception as elites. This is the first step in understanding the effects of an elite education; the next chapters will continue this exploration by focusing on practices: Chapter 5 examines the admission processes of these schools in order to gain an understanding of their mechanisms of closure and relative openness. Chapter 6 continues to explore the hidden world of elite schooling, with a particular focus on the construction of a collective identity as the basis for cohesiveness and mutual solidarity between elite students. Finally, Chapter 7 focuses on excellence (in its multiple forms) and leadership skills; how they are embodied and how they help producing and legitimating the leaders of tomorrow.

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[1] These include Howard and Gaztambide-Fernández (2010), Kenway and McCarthy (2014), Kenway and Koh (2015), Van Zanten, Ball and Darchy-Koechlin (2015), Koh and Kenway (2016), Maxwell and Aggleton (2016).
[2] On Argentina, Gessaghi and Méndez (2015); on Singapore, Koh (2014); on Barbados, Greenhalgh-Spencer et al. (2015), on Bulgaria, Milenkova and Molhov (2011); on China, Yang (2016); on Nigeria, Ayling (2016); on South Africa, Epstein (2014); on Sweden, Börjesson et al. (2016).
[3] According to the Department of Education and Skills, there are 52 fee-paying schools but on closer examination, two schools charge high fees to both day pupils and boarders.
[4] Faguer (1991), Cookson and Persell (1985a) and Khan (2011) distributed questionnaires through schools and past pupils' associations. It was not possible here, as school Principals were reluctant to give me access to past pupils' lists. I did obtain registers of past pupils, but decided against contacting the individuals listed without the school's approval for two reasons: Firstly, Faguer (1991) states that the sense of loyalty to the school prompted

past pupils to fill in his questionnaire; consequently I assumed the response rate would have been very low if my research was not endorsed by the school. Secondly, I felt it was necessary to respect Principals' decisions for ethical reasons and in order not to jeopardize my own and other researchers' future access to the field.

[5] Walford (2001) notes that retired staff are more likely to be critical of their institutions. I also found significant differences in attitudes between teachers and retired staff on the one hand, and principals or vice-principals on the other, the latter being in effect spokespeople for their schools.

[6] In his investigation of sex work in Thailand, Roux decided against anonymizing a Thai NGO because its position in the field was 'hegemonic': changing its name would have been futile; unless the ethnographic study was transposed to another country or to an imaginary context, which would have deprived the analysis of a historical and spatial context (Roux, 2010).

[7] This is how Jounin characterises the anonymization of the mayor of the 8th arrondissement of Paris in his book (Jounin, 2014, p. 133). Easily identifiable individuals (Jounin notes that by the nature of their positions elites are not interchangeable and therefore more difficult to de-identify, compared to others) are thus 'absurdly' de-identified, not to prevent readers from finding out who they are, but to ensure people looking for information on these individuals are not led to the book by search engines.